Invisible Invisibility

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Invisible Invisibility

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Thesis Sponsor:

December 15, 2017
Date

Lisa Corinne Davis
Signature

December 15, 2017
Date

Howard Singerman
Signature of Second Reader
To my family
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Invisible Invisibility

Here is what I suspect my face signifies to other Americans: an invisible person. An icon of so much that the culture pretends to honor but that it in fact patronizes and exploits. Not just people who are ‘good at math’ but a mass of stifled, repressed, abused, conformist quasi-robots who simply do not matter.¹

The “Americanness” of an Asian person is constantly challenged with questions such as “where are you from?” “where are you really from?” or “how do you speak English so well?.” Racism is generally understood as something violent, hostile and overt - something visible. But the racism I experience as an Asian person is so subtle and nuanced that it is almost unrecognizable to the oppressor and invisible to the oppressed. What happens to Asian American does not include being unfairly profiled, shot at, or called terrorists. It is rather a matter of being viewed as foreign and irrelevant.

Nineteenth century Orientalism is marked by essentialism, otherness, and absence.² It was Asian culture as objectified by westerners.³ Despite the large population of Asian Americans in the U.S., Asian history and culture are misconceived and are still considered foreign, undesirable, or irrelevant. Fundamental values in Asian culture are often misconceived. The tradition of respect is often misunderstood as lacking an opinion, the notion of patience as timidity. Standards of beauty, femininity

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³ Ibid.
and masculinity also differ from the West, but are never appreciated on their own terms. Asian females are often objectified and fetishized, while Asian males are considered undesirable. The ideas and values they possess are reduced to traits that are seen as inferior in Western culture.

What I experience as an Asian American is often more similar to the nature of sexism than what is understood as racism: not having a voice, and having to fight for that voice. I am an Asian woman. When I speak of racism against Asians, because the oppressive attitude of the racism resembles sexism against women, my frustration of living an Asian life is often dismissed as sexism, and becomes invisible once again.

White America assumes that its culture is the default for the rest of the world. Western culture assumes its superiority and fails to acknowledge that other cultures are equally valid. Because Asian values are misunderstood or not recognized in America, Asian Americans are given two choices: to conform to White American culture, or to accept and stay in their heritage and be seen as other and irrelevant. The same assumption happens in art history. The dominant art history in the contemporary world is Western art history where a “painting” is assumed to exist on a canvas, a Western invention. To be seen and be understood, Asian artists are then forced to speak the language that is not theirs. Immigrant artists must navigate their stories through the lineage of Western history and Western media, and not through their own.

The Korean Dansaekhwa (which translates as “monochromatic painting”) only recently began to receive Western attention, but it is considered one of the most
important artistic movements in the history of Korean contemporary art. Its promotion in Korea, Japan, and France in the 1970s and ‘80s set the parameters for the discussion of contemporary art in Korea. Dansaekhwa has often been undermined as an appropriation, or a reiteration, of minimalism in the West because of its similar aesthetic. But few Korean artists would have been familiar with minimalism since, at the time Dansaekhwa first emerged, the Korean government’s restrictions and lack of funds effectively prevented all but the most privileged Korean artists from traveling. It was only in the late 1980s when the restriction was relieved. Prior to that, Korean artists’ exposure to Western contemporary art was limited to those included in propaganda images from the United States to promote American culture. Minimalism was not an area of interest for the Korean artists, but was a tool they learned from the west to investigate political and emotional issues against the backdrop of the post-Korean war totalitarian government.

Korean artists were less interested in exemplifying a gesture than in creating a gesture by manipulating the material. Rather than leaving a mark and painting an image, they were more intrigued by the action of wielding the material, such as laboriously pushing the paint across the canvas. These artists created parameters of investigation by setting strict set of rules for them to follow. During the postwar era, Korean abstract artists attempted to restructure Korean painting by accepting Western

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
painting medium, but the task was complicated by the availability of materials.\textsuperscript{8} Oil paints were expensive and the overall shortage of materials led Dansaekhwa artists to mix unconventional binders like concrete and sand into oil paint. Abstract paintings from the mid 50s and 60s fully embody their slowness with their thick heavy materiality.

The attitude in Dansaekhwa translates key Asian values such as the practice of earnestness, perseverance, and moderation. The movement explored various modes of abstraction in “earnest” in the mid-late 50s. Endurance of hardship, reaching a level or mastery through repetition, investigation of emptiness, are the qualities that have a long lineage in Asian art history. This perspective frames artistic practice influenced by two fundamental foundations of Korean art and culture, Taoism and Buddhism.\textsuperscript{9} Dansaekhwa brought these qualities back in sublimation through material manipulation, and used this gesture to stand up against oppressive government.

I was born in London, spent my youth in Seoul, and have lived in the United States for the past fourteen years. I am a naturalized American citizen, and view myself as American. In American schools, I was constantly told to make work about my Korean identity. I refused, as it seemed counterproductive to make work about the culture that I used to be in. I was more interested in being an American, as an Asian person. To me, being an American meant simply being who I am and being accepted for who I am. Being at Hunter reminded me that this was not exactly the case. My

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
Asian self will always remind others, and me, that in the eyes of America, I am merely a Korean, inferior to the great white America.

I am often confronted by viewers who demand representative work that contains something recognizable such as a figure or event that can lead the viewers to think about Asian race and discrimination. However, Asian culture and history is something that is still foreign to most non-Asian American viewers and many lacks contextual knowledge to understand the struggle. I do not intend to educate the viewers of the Asian culture and history through my work to make the struggle visible. My intention is to use canvas structure as a Western framing device of painting as a medium and try to make this cultural barrier visible by breaking out of the frame.

I attempt to address my frustration with Asian invisibility by using abstraction to create a distilled action. I rely on the most basic structure of Western painting - canvas, stretchers and gesso - and deconstruct them to begin. The canvas suggests a pictorial space for images to live, but images bleed outside the canvas and onto the wall. The stretchers do not frame the painting but instead the canvas is unstretched from the structure and stapled onto the wall where the image breaks out of frame. The stretchers fail to contain anything. The material of silicone records the action of my hands as I push, scrape, and lather the material on the canvas. It is the flesh of the painting that matches my skin tone. Lastly, gesso is often applied on top of silicone. As it separates on the rubbery silicone surface, the ground material is now part of the
image. This tactility of bodily character or physicality is often found in the Dansaekhwa.\textsuperscript{10}

Dansaekhwa signifies the modification and evolution of a surface based on the symbolism or simplicity of color.\textsuperscript{11} It places its value in the spiritual fulfillment and spirituality of simplified colors rather than pursuing simplicity of form and color like minimalism did.\textsuperscript{12} I use color symbolically to reclaim psychological territory. Although the color yellow is often used to label Asian skin, my work has been criticized by the perpetrator that yellow is not enough of a signifier for Asian. In slang terms, fetishism of Asians as a race is also known as “yellow fever,” and an Americanized Asian is called a ‘banana’. It is interesting that the very culture that has labeled Asian with yellow has a harder time making a connection from yellow to Asian. To me it demonstrates how insignificant Asians are to the Western culture. The yellow mask is more often recognized by the wearers. By using yellow repetitively in my work with my skin tone, I try to reestablish the connection.

Before Dansaekhwa, Korean Art did not fit into Western art history. It is a twentieth century phenomenon in Korea to make a distinction between “Western painting,” and “Oriental painting.” What is now called “Oriental painting” draws from its own history and structure, and continues to evolve in its own pedigree. Since the

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Lee, “Dansaekhwa,“.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
distinction was first made in 1920\textsuperscript{13}, Dansaekhwa is the tipping point of Korean “Western painting” where Korean art begins to communicate in Western medium.

As I seek to construct my lineage as a painter, it only seems appropriate to begin my search in Dansaekhwa. As a Korean American painter, I will always be seen as a foreigner in the realm of Western art. Dansaekhwa’s diverse actions recorded on the canvas are physical gestures that communicate with the canvas.\textsuperscript{14} Their use of tactile material and gestures that are derived from moral and physical training of Korean culture have granted me the permission to challenge the Western painting structure with materiality. With few distilled materials, I try to break the Western frame that is imposed on me.

\textsuperscript{14} Lee, “Dansaekhwa,”


1. Eugina Song, *Untitled*, silicone and canvas, 55”x73”, 2017

2. Eugina Song, *Untitled*, acrylic, silicone, Mylar, panel and canvas, 62”x78”, 2017

3. Eugina Song, *Untitled*, acrylic, gesso, silicone and canvas, 86” x 50”, 2017

4. Eugina Song, *Untitled*, silicone, gesso and canvas 145”x87”, 2017

5. Installation view

6. Installation view

7. Installation view

8. Installation view
Image 1. *Untitled*, silicone, gesso and canvas 145”x87”, 2017
Image 2. *Untitled*, silicone and canvas, 55”x73”, 2017
Image 3. *Untitled*, acrylic, silicone, mylar, panel and canvas, 62”x78”, 2017
Image 4. *Untitled*, acrylic, gesso, silicone and canvas, 86” x 50”, 2017
INSTALLATION VIEW

Image 5.
Image 8.